

Nearly 40 years ago, an assassin's bullet prematurely ended the life of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee, when the civil rights leader was only 39 years old. Today, his dream lives on; and as we, as a nation, remember his birthday, we must reinvigorate our efforts to become the unified America he envisioned nearly four decades ago.

It is also fitting that on this occasion, we remember the recently departed who carried the torch for equality and civil rights here in Maryland. We remember Congressman Parren Mitchell – Maryland's first African American Member of Congress. Congressman Mitchell believed it was his responsibility to pick up where luminaries like Dr. King left off. Through his work on behalf of minority-owned enterprises, he opened doors of opportunity that were previously closed, and helped countless American families make the most of every chance to succeed.

And we remember the life of Senator Gwendolyn Britt, who represented Prince George's County in the State Senate and passed away only a week and a half ago. In the 1960s, Gwen became a Freedom Rider fighting Jim Crow laws in Mississippi and was one of five activists who challenged segregation in our State by sitting on the merry-go-round at Glen Echo Park in 1961. Gwen's activism gave way to a career in public service, through which she was able to make significant contributions to advance the rights of all of Maryland's citizens.

Congressman Mitchell and State Senator Britt were more than great civil rights activists and political leaders – they were individuals who took great pride in their work and went to great lengths to improve the lives of all Marylanders. Let their lives and the lives of Dr. King and his wife Coretta serve as inspiration for us all to change our nation, our world – and indeed ourselves – for the better.

Indeed, it is vital to recall our past as we strive to improve our future. In past years, I have had the privilege of joining my colleagues in Congress, including Congressman John Lewis, and civil rights leaders for the annual commemoration of the infamous "Bloody Sunday" civil rights march that took place in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965.

On "Bloody Sunday," some 600 civil rights marchers protesting the many methods employed in the South to prevent African Americans from registering to vote headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80. They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs, bullwhips, rubber hoses wrapped with barbed wire and tear gas and drove them back into Selma.

Footage of "Bloody Sunday" was shown on television, causing a national outcry. The incident and the subsequent march led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. influenced the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

As I crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge where Dr. King and thousands of other courageous men and women had staked their claim on freedom, I was overcome with emotion. There, in Selma, standing on the soils of history, I felt the currents of change that empowered a generation, inspired a dream, and spawned a movement that gave way to some of the most

sweeping civil rights reforms of the 20th Century. The pilgrimage to Selma is an uplifting reminder that men and women of courage and character can change hearts and change a nation.

But as far as we have come in pursuit of Dr. King's Promised Land, the inequity that he and others fought so hard against persist in our country today. Discrimination may no longer be safe in the social, political and legal realms, but its shadow of poverty, ignorance, and injustice remain.

While we continue to see the consequences of inequality and injustice, we must not give into darkness and despair. We must recommit ourselves to fixing the disparities in our country and building a better future for all Americans. We must make sensible choices in choosing domestic priorities, and we can do this by rededicating ourselves to civil, social and economic justice and equality for all Americans.

Let me end with one of Dr. King's own galvanizing cries for change, delivered in a speech to striking Memphis sanitation workers just days before his death, "Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation."

As we mark the anniversary of his birth, we must take the time to reflect on the words, the life and the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior - a man who moved a nation to change – and take inspiration from him as we work together to ensure continued progress, peace and prosperity for all.